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SIR WILLIAM OSLER AS A MAN OF LETTERS.¹

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THERE are men of talent who do the one work in life they are peculiarly fitted for and nothing more. In all else they are like us ordinary mortals. There are others for whom work along one line, of one kind, is not enough. They have such wide interests, such capacity for intellectual labor, such a large mental outlook, live in such a rich intellectual world, that they are compelled to do serious work in several fields. Others can do one kind of important work well, but must also have some other intellectual pleasure. Such men seek avocations as well as vocations. An avocation is a glorified hobby. Just as small souls collect postage stamps, or play chess, or golf, or do some other harmless thing, so certain greater souls must rest their minds, not by idleness and sleep as does the dog, or by impish play like our distant cousin the monkey, but by some pleasant and, at the same time, useful productive work. The pursuit of letters is such an avocation, and one that appealed strongly to Sir William Osler as it has appealed to so many physicians. I say has appealed, because there is a justified fear that the newer methods of education which certain philosophers of the meaner sort are trying to force on the coming generation and our worship of specialism, not

¹ Read at the Osler Memorial Meeting, College of Physicians of Philadelphia, March 3, 1920.

only in medicine, but in all kinds of work, will end in breeding men who will have little interest in, or pleasure from, pure scholarship for its own sake. The movement is not a permanent one but will do much injury for many years. Osler was out of sympathy with any such method of improving the race; he belonged to a world that is dead or rather in eclipse. He, as a boy, lived in an old-fashioned, intellectual atmosphere; his mind was fed not on mental pap but on real literature. His early taste was not spoilt by the worthless stuff sent out by the printing presses of today, in such huge quantities that real literature is smothered. In his boyhood the making of books was expensive: wood pulp and multiplex printing presses were not yet invented. The book trade catered to the full-grown intellect. Much that was printed was dull, stupid and soon found its proper place, but much was scholarly, and, not a little, good, strong meat for full-grown men. The paranoiac, whom we have always with us, had to have a well-lined pocket-book to get his crazy panaceas for social and political evils printed. He was not welcomed in the Sunday supplement and the uplift magazines because they had not been imposed on a much suffering people. The Bible was still a living book; the subjunctive mood had not gone out of existence; sentences did not have to be reduced to the length of a clause, lest the reader should have brain-fag, and colons and semi-colons were still in common use. Punctuation was a well-known art. People either read or did not read, and if they read they read and studied things worth the reading. They did not disdain to reread and got on friendly, or it might be very unfriendly terms with an author, but they at least knew his works.

More important, he belonged to a generation which followed the old tradition, that the physician ought to be a scholar, first broken away from by Germany and, later, following Germany's example, by us. Today we have wandered far from tradition, and under the pernicious influence of so-called efficiency are trying the experiment of vocational training. Theoretical pedagogues of the newer school, pretending they have discovered a new psychology, teach us that to be efficient the boy must, from a very early time, learn only the things useful in his future work. The disciples of efficiency do not realize that the one thing we need is well-grown, well-rounded-out men. Osler grew up in an atmosphere of real efficiency, an atmosphere which made men able to get all out of life that life has to give, and hence able to give back abundantly.

Environment reinforced his strong hereditary bent toward appreciation of letters and, in addition to appreciation, he had the impulse to accomplish. The two do not always go together: ability to enjoy is much more common than ability to create. Indeed, sometimes among men whose trade is writing there is a curious lack of appreciation, of power to appreciate, at least the work of others. But this is a human failing having deep-seated causes. Writing with

him was not a trade, not a thing done for money or fame, but for very joy in the doing, his pleasure, his rest from serious work. Another motive was that he realized well his peculiarly powerful personal influence on students, and, as he firmly felt the need of scholarliness in physicians, in order that they should have such a grasp on all culture that they would see nature as a whole, and see the real relations between things which to the vulgar mind seem to have nothing in common, he strove in his non-medical essays to stimulate an appetite for the study of biography and history, the keys which open the lock of philosophy. He handed on the torch to sympathetic hands; that was easy enough; but more than that, he made kinetic, potential tendencies in many a young man who might otherwise never have been stimulated in the right way. He knew full well that to understand the medicine of today one must know the medicine of the past, and many of his essays deal with that subject. He was consciously or unconsciously ever fighting the pernicious German intellectual influence in medicine which has done so much harm in America. I mean the idea that advance comes from each man taking up some one little subject and studying that thoroughly. Now there is good in this, just as there is good in a method of modern industrial life whereby a man in, say shoemaking, is taught to do some one little thing until he becomes almost as automatic as the machine itself. The good is that shoes are cheaper, more people can therefore buy them than in the old days; the evil is the shoemaker is not a man but a cog. Further, no such workman will be able to see shoes in relation to the universe and invent some better foot-covering. So in medicine the research workers by the German system rarely make great discoveries, and as men they will insofar be failures in that they will not get all that is possible out of life. One reason why modern Germany has made relatively so few great fundamental discoveries in science, why it has had so few stars of the first magnitude, while having made so many little discoveries, having so many minor stars, is this very thing, that the Germans have carried specialism so far that each man's mental life is passed in a world too small for him to see the great universe.

Wide as were Osler's intellectual interests, many of his friends were astonished at his acceptance of the invitation to deliver the Ingersoll lecture on "The Immortality of Man." He declined once, but when a second invitation came he felt he could not again refuse, the more especially because President Eliot told him others of his profession had also declined. The inference seems to be that a refusal to lecture on the subject might strengthen the popular opinion that where there are four physicians there are three atheists. There is no need to say that Osler's philosophy did not agree with the saying. In a private letter to a friend he classed himself as a subconscious Teresian. What that is everybody who has studied the history of religion knows, and those who have not manifest a

lack of interest in the matter of which they need not be proud. He chose for his title "Science and Immortality." In the lecture he frankly confesses science cannot help in deciding the question as to whether there is personal survival after death, points out that whole races have played their part and come and gone and been careless of immortality, that even today, though a small number of people live this life as a preparation for the life to come, the majority are in no way influenced in conduct or in thought by what the future may be. His own feeling is that "to keep his mind sweet the modern scientific man should be saturated with the Bible and Plato, with Homer, Shakespeare and Milton: to see life through their eyes may enable him to strike a balance between the rational and the emotional, which is the most serious difficulty of the intellectual life." This is good advice, but whether it is followed will depend primarily on a man's protoplasmic make-up and in less degree on his childhood's nurture. Intellectual affinity is quite as real as chemical, nor more nor less mysterious, and how Smith or Jones or Robinson will react to Plato or Milton or any other mind, whether there will be any reaction, or if any what, depends on things we know nothing of and certainly have no control over.

Osler showed his zest for letters and his ability therein even in his purely medical writing. This is nowhere better shown than in his paper on "The Treatment of Disease," written for the *The Oxford Medicine*. Written when he was no longer young, I think it was among the last things he did, it is his apologia for his therapeutic methods. You all know, of course, that the therapeutically credulous, the lovers of every new drug, the worshippers at the shrine of the idol medication, called him a therapeutic nihilist, and not always in language to be used by tongues polite. They have not, and will not, enjoy this essay, especially as there is an undertone running through the whole indicating that polypharmacists may not know quite as much as they imagine. His emphasis on the fact that the starting-point of all treatment is a thorough knowledge of the natural history of disease is not pleasant reading to the gentlemen who much prefer to spin cobwebs of therapeutic method, out of a thread of dream physiology, spun with busy pens on paper at a writing desk.

Most of Osler's essays had some relation to medicine. He was from early manhood particularly interested in biography. One whole volume entitled *An Alabama Student and Other Biographic Essays* contains only biography. But he was interested in these men not only as physicians but as men, and especially as men who conquered obstacles; men who by sheer effort of mind had done things and thought things others better placed, sometimes, had neither done nor thought. His social instinct was so great that he was not content to have many living friends scattered over the whole world, but was compelled to hunt up all the dead worthies

who had done things and been forgotten. In friendship he resurrected them that they might have more friends.

He was strongly influenced by Greek thought. He was so profoundly Platonic that more than once in writing, and many, many times in common talk, he said he would rather be wrong with Plato than right with anybody else. His worship of Greek philosophy pervaded him: it influenced him in many ways: even in his strictly scientific writing now and again a reference to Plato appears. As I know no Latin and less Greek, and can make no claim to any deep knowledge even of Jowett, but am a sort of barbarian (in the older sense) who has read a little philosophy, mainly to be astonished to find how modern, how familiar much of it seems, I am entirely incompetent to speak on matters with which Osler was familiar. I am somewhat like the woman who was astonished at the number of quotations Shakespeare used in *Hamlet*. I can only say that it might be useful to the world-rescuers of the newest school, who, as I understand, would abolish the study of history, since our problems are all new, and the study of ancient philosophy and science because those old thinkers are behind the times, to read, learn and inwardly digest what Plato has to say about education and not a few other things. I am sure if they have as open minds as they boast of having they would come away from such reading with a feeling of humility such as they have never had before. A few of them might even stop teaching in order to learn something themselves. Osler's interest in Plato and things platonic led to an honor which I think had never come to any other physician, the presidency of the Classical Association, at the meeting of which in May, 1919, he delivered the presidential address. His subject was "The Old Humanities and the New Science." The address is characteristic. It shows here and there his sly and sometime impish wit, his unexpected references to out-of-the-way characters in books, once popular but now forgotten, or reigning among the immortals in name only, having ghostly immortality, and finally his wisdom. He holds the balance true between science and the humanities and maintains what will ever be true, that the educated man needs both or he is not an educated man. The circumstances of the writing of this address impressed me tremendously. Written at an age later than that at which most men cease to think, and, if surviving in this world, are often in a sense mere automata, living in an intellectual past, the gates of the brain tight shut against the entrance of any new idea, no matter how strong the battle without and how great an effort is made to compel entrance, with emotions deadened, not, as the poets say, by increased wisdom but because the life-carrying stream passes more sluggishly over the cells which, in some mysterious way, secrete thought and bathes them in a fluid less rich in the hormones carried from distant organs, and because the sewers of the body are clogged, it shows no sign of age. Remember, too, its author had

lived through four long years of war, had seen his country wracked and driven almost beyond endurance, and finally had suffered the sacrifice of his only son and child. The man who could endure all this and yet make such an address needs no argument to prove his worth.

Osler made no pretense to being a great light in literature; none of his essays will give him a living immortality; they will of necessity soon be put on the upper shelves in the store rooms of libraries and only be read by medical antiquarians hunting up the lives of old worthies, just as he shook the dust from many an old volume written by men one time great and resurrected only because he had a mind curious to know the steps that led to the growth of science and of medicine. But the influence his essays have had on the men of the days of his teaching will be a never-dying force for good. Just as there is an immortality of matter carried from generation to generation, so there is an immortality of thought passed on from teacher to student. Few men have chosen their hobbies so wisely as he. He helped others in getting his own greatest pleasures.

SIR WILLIAM OSLER AS HOST TO AMERICANS IN ENGLAND DURING THE WAR.¹

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IN the autumn of 1904 a young man recently emerged from a hospital internship, and having had the temerity to send out certain medical reprints, received the following letter:

"Thanks for your papers, with which I am greatly pleased, not only for the evidence of good work they show, but for the memory of your father and grandfather. The tuberculous endocarditis paper is most interesting and will be useful, as I have just been going over all our material on the subject. Could you not come down this winter and give us a little talk at our Laennec Society? I send you a program and you will see the sort of work we are trying to do."

Needless to say the young man accepted, and thus first tasted Oslerian hospitality and fell under the spell of Oslerian influence.

The incident itself is of interest only in that it exemplifies what was happening to other young physicians in other cities. The mere fact that someone did read reprints, and especially that no less a man than Osler himself had shown a personal interest in one's

¹ Read at the Osler Memorial Meeting, College of Physicians, of Philadelphia, March 3, 1920.